



*1st Lt. Ronald Jean introduces Capt. Rich Nessel to French President Sarkozy following the memorial service for the fallen Soldiers in Kabul. (Photo courtesy SOCEUR PAO)*

## **The battle of Sper Kunday: U.S., French and Afghans fighting together as one**

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Combat never goes exactly as expected, and it is not so much about what the plan says, but more about how Soldiers in tough situations bond with and support their brothers around them when the shooting starts. Such was the case on a scorching August day that led to the most significant loss of life for the French army since the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 58 soldiers.

This day, 10 French paratroopers were killed and another 21 wounded. After the battle, President Nicholas Sarkozy immediately flew to Kabul to be with the men who fought and died alongside each other and to reassure them that France would stand by their side.

A ceremony January 23 at Panzer Kaserne gymnasium revealed the heroic efforts of all Coalition forces involved in the fight, known as the Battle of Sper Kunday, as two Green Berets from 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, Company A, were honored

with Bronze Star Medals for Valor and six others with Army Commendation Medals for Valor.

On the morning of Aug. 18, 2008, members of Operational Detachment Alpha 0114 and an International Security Assistance Force contingent began movement toward the village of Sper Kunday, located in the mountainous region northeast of Kabul. The ISAF was composed of 60 French troops from the 8th Infantry Parachute Regiment soldiers, 30 French marines from the Regiment de Marche du Tchad serving as the Embedded Training Team, or mentor element, for the Afghan Forces, and a platoon from the 2nd Company C Kandak of the Afghanistan National Army. Their mission was to investigate a report of foreign fighters in the area.

As the 8th Para elements crested the saddle above the village, on foot, they found themselves caught in a coordinated enemy ambush cutting them off from friendly support.

Immediately, the ETT commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Ronald Jean of the French marines, working in coordination with the U.S. Special Forces commander, Capt. Rich Nessel, and the ANA, set up a hasty perimeter to support the element in contact on the mountainside.

Complications stemming from an inability to contact higher headquarters as well as the element in contact contributed to the “fog of war.” Jean attempted to contact the Para platoon leader and the supporting elements at the patrol base five kilometers behind him, but to no avail. Nessel’s team was trying to call their own Task Force, but also initially had communication problems.

With fire coming from several directions, Jean switched focus to his men and placed his vehicle in an exposed position to shield his dismounted forces nearby.

As he directed fire and attempted to gain situational awareness of the elements in contact, he still could not make constant radio contact with the Para elements on the hill. (He later learned this was because the Para platoon leader had been severely wounded and the platoon second-in-command had been killed. In addition, the platoon radio was destroyed when the radio operator was killed.)

Meanwhile, Nessel and his team became targets of effective enemy small-arms fire. As they returned fire and began calling for air support, it became evident they were facing a determined enemy who was not planning to shoot and run like so many other insurgents they had faced.

The fire was incredibly intense around both the Special Forces team and Jean, who was leading the ETT. Eventually, an enemy sniper round found its mark, embedding deep in Jean’s leg. He calmly continued to issue orders on his radio even as U.S. Special Forces medics rushed to his aid.

“It was a heart-stopping moment, not because of fear or anything, but of concern and the sudden rush to take action and to render aid,” said Nessel. “Lieutenant Jean just drove on; the injury definitely affected him, but he was in charge of his men, and he was not going anywhere. We just followed that cue and kept up the fight.”

As the day wore on, the coalition forces maneuvered toward the enemy positions, resisting steady rocket propelled grenade, machine-gun and small-arms fire. Lt. Jean tried to evacuate the pinned-down platoon that was still under heavy enemy fire, but he was ordered to wait until reinforcements arrived to attempt a new action.

Teamwork amongst the U.S. and French forces was critical. “The French up in the saddle were surrounded on three sides,” said Nessel. “If First Lieutenant Jean’s men and

our men did not fight as hard as they did, the rest of the Paras would have been completely surrounded and annihilated. There would have been 60 French KIA. The enemy tried to accomplish this and failed. Our direct fire repulsed the enemy's attempts to encircle the Para elements and close. Effective close-air support held back the enemy's direct assault."

The wounded Jean became the sole link between the French forces, the U.S. Special Forces and the close air support aircraft above. He translated commands flawlessly from Nessel to the French forces on the ground and back through to the U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Controller attached to the Special Forces Team, who was able to direct air support onto hostile enemy targets.

Coordination of the fight was being conducted in two languages and through two U.S. services. It was the professionalism of both the French and the U.S. forces on the ground that enabled effective command and control in an extremely chaotic situation.

For the next seven hours under direct fire, while suffering an excruciating leg wound, Jean never left the forefront of the battlefield. He allowed the medics to render aid only after the enemy forces were no longer an imminent danger to the Task Force. He did not leave the battlefield even as five separate medical evacuation helicopters, which he directed and controlled for his men, arrived and departed. Jean stayed on the battlefield until each of his Soldiers and countrymen had left or been recovered.

During the 26 hours of the battle, U.S. Special Forces, French and Afghan Soldiers fought together in the thickest of combat, and stood together as one team fighting and bleeding together as they supported the people of Afghanistan in their fight against the enemies of peace and stability.